

ON MARKING AND CATALOGING YOUR ARTIFACTS

by

Robert N. Converse

199 Converse Drive, Plain City, Ohio 43064
rconverse@columbus.rr.com

Artifacts are important and irreplaceable pieces of prehistory and should be treated as such. They are in many instances the only evidence we have of the people who occupied the New World for 15,000 years.

While many of these pieces may be looked on by their finders as curiosities or by their owners as rare and valuable discoveries, their true value lies in what they can tell us about the people who created them eons ago. To reflect the importance of these unique pieces, responsible collectors or surface hunters should not only maintain a catalog but feel duty bound to mark every piece in his or her collection with all they know about the piece. With responsible collectors there is an obligation to pass on to future generations this invaluable information.

One might ask the benefit of such a procedure, but for present day and future researchers, such information is crucial. Future researchers might extrapolate from well catalogued artifacts and collections, the distribution patterns of, for example, fluted points or Glacial Kame gorgets or the aboriginal use of certain kinds of raw materials. Those artifacts which do not display such information are nearly useless from an archaeological standpoint.

So, how do we identify and properly catalog these important and priceless pieces? Here I will make a point of great importance — simply putting a catalog number on a piece has little relevance. Those artifacts with only a catalog number when separated from their catalogs are meaningless. Even more frustrating is the fact that the researcher or collector who sees this “catalog-number only” piece knows, that somewhere there is a catalog with attendant information matching that number — but whose catalog is it? Even knowing the name of the collector is little help if you don't know where the catalog is. Some of the old catalog number markings are easily read — and in fact enough familiarity with old collection markings can tell you what collector originally owned it — but there is still the problem of not having the catalog to refer to. Strangely and inexplicably, some collectors of today who have those old catalogs will not share their information with other collectors—they do a disservice to both the avocation and their friends.

More than fifty years ago I first visited Dr. Meuser and had the pleasure of looking at what was the most important, complete, and *well-documented* collection of stone and slate in the eastern United States. More importantly, each and every piece had written on it the total provenience known to Dr. Meuser. His catalog gave further information about the piece such as material and other attributes — but even without Doc's catalog,

there was no trouble identifying the origin of the piece.

Artifacts from the Meuser collection, now scattered over much of the United States, remain to this day the best provenienced and most valuable pieces one can collect from any of the famous old collections — and the information written on the piece accounts for a great part of that value. The fact that Doc marked each and every one of his artifacts with the pertinent information on their provenience should be a model for all collectors. It is depressing to imagine what the archaeological or intrinsic value of Doc's collection would have been had it not been so marked and cataloged. Unbelievably, I have seen Meuser pieces whose owners have removed the Meuser identification and replaced it with their own cryptic catalog numbers — and by doing so, severely reduced their value.

How To Mark Your Pieces

The best way to mark your pieces is relatively simple. Get a small bottle of India ink and a steel tipped pen — the kind you dip in the ink to write with. Both cost less than five dollars. But first practice. Get a piece of scrap flint, dip the pen in the ink, wipe off any excess on the side of the bottle and begin writing. You will find after a little practice that it is not difficult. One word of caution after you've finished, clean the pen by wiping it off with a damp cloth. If it has somewhat dried simply run water over it which will soften any residue. India ink is relatively soft when fresh.

Keeping the pen clean is important and is the reason that most people think it's difficult to write with an old-fashioned pen. Dried residue on the pen can sometimes make the pen difficult to write with.

If the ink tends to curl up at the edges when writing on a piece of flint, the flint has oils on it from handling. Simply take a damp rag and wipe it off and start over.

After marking it, set it aside and let it dry for a few minutes. Sometimes at this point you might want to cover the marking with a coat of clear fingernail polish. This is often done on shiny surfaces such as chlorite or serpentine. Should one eventually want to remove these markings, a cloth with a little fingernail polish remover will easily take it all off.

If a mistake is made, fresh India ink markings can be removed by simply taking a damp cloth and wiping them away. If the ink has dried, it might take a little more wetting or rubbing. Sometimes India ink markings on flint tend to have the edges curl but this is because there is oily residue on the surface of the artifact which should be wiped off before marking.

There are times when it may be desirable to mark black pieces with white. I have never had much luck with white ink since little of it is opaque enough to look good. But there is an easy way to mark black pieces. Get a box of typing correction tabs — the tape used when a mistake is made in typing. Take a tab — about 2 1/4 inches long — lay it on to the piece to be written on — impression side down — and secure the edges with small pieces of scotch tape so it won't move. Then use a ball point pen and write down the information on the tape. Remove the tape and pure white letters will be seen. These have to be covered with a coating of clear fingernail polish or they will eventually wear off. However, even black ink will work on almost any black surface — but it might be read with difficulty.

Sometimes you may be in a situation where you don't have writing supplies with you — but you still want to mark the piece before you forget its provenience. Get an ordinary lead pencil and write down on the piece the pertinent data. Even when written on lightly with a pencil, the data can still be read — then later easily removed for proper marking.

Never put a label on any kind of artifact. Needless to say, if the label comes off, all information is lost — even for the owner. I have seen numerous fine pieces which show where a label was once attached but which has now come off — and any information at all is long gone. I have also seen many labeled artifacts which — frustratingly — cannot be read, the label having faded or the writing blurred. In addition, many labels after they have fallen off leave an unsightly mark on the piece which cannot be removed.

Never glue an artifact to anything. There are glues which permeate the surface of the artifact which discolor the stone forever and cannot be removed by anything.

One must also be careful of attaching transparent tape to an artifact, especially slate or stone, since it too can leave an indelible mark or discoloration.

When it comes to marking artifacts, one of the insidious results of today's technology is the marking pen. Although they are easy to use, the ink is often indelible and absorbed by the stone, even by flint — and spreads leaving an unsightly and sometime unreadable mark. So far as I know, there is no way to remove those stains.

If you do not have your collection marked, now is the time to do it. It will be invaluable to future collectors and researchers — and like Doc Meuser, your legacy will be appreciated forever.



Figure 1 (Converse) Examples of Dr. Meuser marking of artifacts. Dr. Meuser always cited the exact location of the find if that information was available.



Figure A (Converse) This small effigy of chlorite tells us that it was taken from a mound in Butler County, Ohio. Since it was once in the Judge Edward Payne collection, that information should be entered in the catalog.



Figure 2 (Converse)
Never glue an artifact to anything.
This Adena cache blade shows
the effect of gluing pieces to a board.
The glue stains cannot be removed.
Each blade in the cache is thus stained.



Figure 4 (Converse)
Fine printing can be done
with a steel pen and India ink.



Figure 3 (Converse) Never use transparent tape on an artifact. Stain from a strip of tape is evident on this pendant. Stain cannot be removed.



Figure 5 (Converse) Pieces from old time collector Dean Driskill showed a catalog number in white ink in a very prominent place. Without the Driskill catalog such markings are of little help.



Figure 7 (Converse) All that is needed to properly mark an artifact is a steel tipped pen, a small bottle of India ink, and a bottle of clear nail polish.



Figure 9 (Converse) All pertinent information should be printed on the piece itself. Further comments can be shown in the collection catalog.



Figure 6 (Converse) Example of a faded label. Enough of the letters survived to ascertain the origin of the piece. Labels are not a good idea.



Figure 8 (Converse) Type correction tabs will work for fine marking of jet black pieces. These need to be covered with nail polish.



Number from the Hill Collection, Delaware, Ohio. Although recognizable, no one knows the whereabouts of the Hill catalog. Thus number is useless.